

The Trouble With Squibs

By Troy Denning; Illustration by Russell Walks

Beyond the end of the concourse shimmered the lights of Pavo Prime, a twinkling reef of undersea glitz that lured gamblers and fish-watchers alike to the jewel-blue waters of the galaxy's most dazzling casino world. A school of golden moonmouths was kissing their way along the exterior of the viewing wall, oblivious to the toothy culkuda grinning at them from beneath a blinkboard vaunting high payoffs at the StarUrchin. Of the hundreds of beings riding the slidewalk, no more than a handful would recognize the irony in what they were seeing. Pavo Prime was one giant feeding shoal, and the favorite prey did not breathe water.

Han Solo was one of the few who understood exactly what he saw and he loved it. A trip to Pavo Prime could be like taking all the exciting parts of life and compressing them into a few short days of chance and glitter. It made him feel alive in the same way that running an Imperial blockade did, except that it was a lot easier to walk away when things went bad -- not that he expected anything to go bad on this trip. With the prettiest ambassador in the galaxy at his side and ten thousand spare credits in his pocket, how could it?

The slidewalk entered a noisy transit terminal packed with a hundred different species of tourists. Most were tugging large repulsorlift luggage sleds and more interested in the moonmouths outside than in the touts and pickpockets quietly sizing them up. Han took Leia by the arm and angled for a holographic banner that read PRIVATE LUXSUB. Because they were trying to keep a low profile, Chewbacca and C-3PO were following with three luggage sleds twenty paces behind, far enough away that they would not draw attention to the Solos.

Han and Leia were halfway to the holobanner when a beak-mouthed Ishi Tib fixed her eyestalks on them. Though Leia wore a pair of false white eyebrows, white contact lenses, and a stylish min-cloth veil, Han was not all that surprised when the Ishi Tib continued to stare. Leia's eyes were among the most beautiful in the galaxy, and it would take more than a change of color and a pair of synthetic brows to change that.

The Ishi Tib started toward them. "Say, aren't you--"

"No." Leia swung her small shoulder satchel between them. "You're mistaking me for someone else. It happens all the time." The Ishi Tib crinkled her leathery face. "You're sure? Your voice sounds--"

"I'm sure." Leia grabbed Han by the arm and started in the opposite direction, then whispered, "Tell me again why we couldn't use a private berth?"

"Because private berths are for high rollers, and we don't happen to have a million credits in flash money." Han's disguise was simpler than Leia's, a false goatee and a dapper prow-hat that so far had not drawn a second glance. "And even if we did, hitting the sabacc tables with that kind of bank wouldn't put this Ludlo Lebauer in a very charitable mood. Casino bosses hate to lose big."

Leia raised a false eyebrow. "Pretty sure of yourself, Flyboy."



"I'm banned in half the casinos on Pavo Prime," Han said proudly. "Ask Chewie about the time I broke the bank at the Seahorse."

"The Seahorse? There isn't any Seahorse Casino."

Han smiled. "That's my point."

"If you say so." Leia rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Please don't break Lebauer's casino until after he gives me the boasas:"

"That depends," Han said.

"On what?"

"On how nicely you ask." As much as Han was looking forward to their holiday on Pavo Prime, it had been Leia who suggested the trip. New Republic Intelligence -- NRI -- had stumbled across a set of ten Alderaanian boasa statues that had been offworld when the Death Star blasted the planet into so much dust, and Leia was fiercely determined to preserve the boasas for future generations of Alderaanians. Given that the statues were currently owned by a casino boss -- and that Leia had nothing to bargain with but her quick wit -- Han put their chances at somewhere between tiny and nonexistent.

Still, he would not have bet against her -- he had seen Leia do the impossible too often to ever count her out. Besides, he was glad to be on a mission that did not involve saving the New Republic. Han was as happy as the next guy to do his part, but once in a while it was nice to go on a simple, ordinary business trip.

The crowd of tourists began to thicken, slowing progress through the terminal to a crawl. Worried that they would grow too far separated from their companions, Han turned to wave Chewbacca forward and saw a pair of meter-high rodents slipping toward him through the forest of legs. With pointed muzzles, tufted ears, and deep brown eyes, they were almost as cute as baby Wookiees -- and twice as much trouble. The instant they saw Han watching them, they flashed toothy white grins and raised their small hands in greeting.

Han spun in the opposite direction, pulling Leia after him, and began to shoulder through the crowd. "Don't look now," he muttered, "but we've got trouble."

Leia did not look. "What is it? Bounty hunters? Assassins?" Her hand dropped toward the holdout blaster hidden in her dress pocket. "Old buddies?"

"Worse," Han said. "Squibs."

Leia's fingers dug into Han's arm. "Not--"

"Afraid so." Ignoring the trail of indignant protests they were leaving in their wake, Han pulled Leia past a pair of blue-skinned Duros and saw the luxsub booking counter ahead. "Sligh and Emala."

"What about Grees?"

"Didn't see him."

"Oh," Leia said. "That's bad. Very bad."

"Yeah."

They had met Grees, Sligh, and Emala on Tatooine a few months earlier, on a trip to recover another of Alderaanian's surviving masterpieces. The debacle that followed had not been entirely the fault of the Squibs, but their "help" had certainly complicated the situation. The last thing Han -- or Leia -- wanted was another entanglement with those three. The trip to Pavo Prime was, after all, supposed to be more pleasure than business.

Han angled toward the only empty service post, where a silver vending droid with darkened photoreceptors stood beside a closed access gate. Overhead, a gold holobanner flashed, JAIJAY LUXSUBS. SORRY -- ALL CRAFT BOOKED.

Han banged his palm on the counter. "Wake up, pal:"

The droid's photoreceptors brightened. "Good day, sir. I'm afraid--"

"I can read," Han said, eyeing the hatch behind the counter. "You have a private docking salon?"

"Of course," the droid said. "But all of our craft are out on hour-hires. It's quite impossible to say when one might be available." Han glanced over his shoulder and saw that the Squibs were coming up fast, still grinning and waving, and taking full advantage of their size to dodge toward him. A few paces behind, Chewbacca's furry form towered above the crowd, his eyes fixed on the Jaijay holobanner and his head cocked in puzzlement. Obviously, he had not yet seen the Squibs.

Han slapped a credit-chip on the counter and turned back to the droid. "Subcontract with another line. We'll pay double."

The droid glanced at the adjacent queues, which, though long, were moving quickly. "But it would be more economical--"

"He *said* to subcontract," Leia insisted. "We'd like to go through Jaijay; you're noted for your excellent customer service."

"I wasn't aware of that." The droid read the credit-chip, then the access gate opened. "But we *are* improving. Jaijay wishes you the best of luck during your stay."

Han pointed toward Chewbacca and instructed the droid to admit only the Wookiee and his droid companion, then retrieved his credit-chip and followed Leia through the access gate.

The interior of the docking salon was roomy and well appointed, with a double row of bodyform chairs, a vidwall advertising Pavo Prime's many different attractions, and -- next to the boarding hatch -- an observation bubble with a view of the underwater city that went down easily a full kilometer. Although casino lights glimmered all the way to the bottom, submarines could be seen only in the top two hundred meters; beyond that depth, running lights attracted too many big predators.

Barely giving the scene a second glance, Leia stared at the hatch through which they had come.

"What are the Squibs doing on Pavo Prime?"

"Do you really want to know?" Han countered.

"No," Leia said. "But we didn't just bump into them. The galaxy isn't that small."

"They must have done pretty well after we left Tatooine," Han suggested. "Maybe they're just here to spend some money."

Leia looked at him doubtfully. "Squibs?"

"Or maybe they heard about the boasa statues," Han admitted. Of all the art pieces that had been offworld at the time of Alderaan's destruction, the boasa statues were the oldest and most mysterious, for they had been created by the mysterious Killiks who inhabited Alderaan long before humans arrived. "Maybe they're here to buy the boasas."

"And which do you think makes more sense?"

Before Han could answer, the hatch opened and Chewbacca and C-3PO arrived with the luggage sleds. Chewbacca scowled out the observation bubble and, seeing no luxsub waiting to pick them up, turned to Han and groaned.

"Of course I saw the sign." Han glanced through the open hatch and, finding no sign of Emala or Sligh, turned back to Chewbacca. "I just wanted to lose the Squibs."

The fur rose along Chewbacca's spine, and C-3PO asked, "Squibs? Here?"

"So you didn't see them?" Leia addressed this to Chewbacca. The Wookiee shook his head.

"Well, that's something. Maybe we lost them." Leia checked her chronometer and turned to Han. "We need to find a way to the Pearl Island Casino. Lebauer is expecting us in thirty minutes, and it won't help our cause to be late."

"I see no reason we should be late at all, Princess Leia," C-3PO said. "Here's our ride now."

Han turned to see a conch-shaped luxsub drifting up to the docking hatch, a bulbous-eyed Mon Calamari visible in the pilot's dome. The sign on the hull read, "If You Want Style, You Want Pink Conch."

Chewbacca roawwled a question.

"Yeah, that *was* fast," Han said.

He sealed the salon's interior hatch, and then waited with the others as the luxsub docked and equalized pressure. When the salon's exterior hatch opened, they found themselves looking into a passenger cabin with pink velvet seats, pink refreshment decanters, and pink-tinted viewports.

"It looks like a Hutt's throat in there," Leia said. She turned to Han. "Maybe we should swim."

"Swim?" C-3PO repeated. "I really don't think that is a very good idea. I would sink like--"

"Relax, Threepio." Han pushed his head through the hatch and, aside from the decor, saw nothing unusual. "It's a joke."

They all climbed inside and sealed the hatch, then the luxsub executed a slow turn past the StarUrchin blinkboard, allowing the passengers a close view of the bony culkuda-head grinning out from beneath the sign. Han gave the pilot their destination, and it was not long before they were angling toward a mountain-shaped casino with a giant palm-and-pearl marquee glowing atop the summit.

A hundred meters later, Leia let out a sigh of relief. "That wasn't so hard after all. When you said Squibs, I thought we'd be stuck with them."

"Not on this trip." Han closed his eyes and rubbed his fingertips together, as though he were willing a chip-card to change suits for him. "I'd blast them first."

A soft pop sounded across from Han, and he opened his eyes to discover that a seat cushion next to C-3PO had lifted up, revealing a pair of black nostrils and two big brown eyes.

"That hurts my feelings, Solo, it really does," said a small squeaky voice. "Is that how you treat *all* your friends?"

Chewbacca bellowed an objection, and the startled pilot nearly dived into a passing blottal before he could bring them back on course. The Squib gave Chewbacca an evil stare.

"Do I *deserve* that?" The Squib turned to C-3PO. "And do you mind, chiphead? You're sitting on Emala."

"Oh dear!" C-3PO stood. "I beg your pardon."

As the two Squibs clambered out of the storage compartments beneath the seats, Han kept an eye on Leia, ready to grab her arm if she reached for her pocket holster. The truth was that he felt like blasting the pair himself, but there were laws against that sort of thing even on Pavo Prime. It would not be fair to say that the Squibs were responsible for what Leia had lost on Tatooine, but they had certainly profited from it.

Once the Squibs had extracted themselves and lowered the seats again, Leia asked, "What are you two doing here?"

"Giving you a ride," the female -- Emala -- said. "You didn't make it easy."

"There's a reason," Han said. He was relieved to hear the anger in Leia's tone; she didn't grow really dangerous until her feelings became unreadable. "Like maybe we're here on vacation. Maybe we don't want to have anything to do with you."

"Vacation?" Emala rolled her eyes, then reached over and turned off the intercom. "Since when do the Solos take vacations?"

"You're here on a mission," Sligh said, turning to Leia. "Who do you think told New Republic Intelligence about Lebauer's boasa statues in the first place?"

Han glanced over at Leia.

She shrugged. "The liaison officer would only say the information came from a reliable source."

"That's us," Sligh said cheerily. "Reliable. You know we'd never try to put anything over on you. You're much too smart."

"Yeah, sure," Han said. "Where's Grees? Trying to break into the *Falcon*?" Sligh and Emala glanced at each other uncomfortably, and their eyes grew so sad and watery that Han instantly regretted the tone of the question.

"Look, I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know. The last time we saw you, everything was--"

"Don't worry about it:" Emala sniffed and ran her palm over her nostrils. "There's no need to concern yourself with our feelings. We're not here for your sympathy."

"Then you're smarter than I thought," Leia said. "So why are you here?"

"A business prop--"

"Forget it," Leia said.

Sligh scowled. "But you haven't even heard--"

"Don't need to," Han said. "Nobody burns us twice."

"Burn you? Is that what you think?" Emala wrinkled her nose in contempt. "And I thought Han Solo was a player."

"Give it up," Leia said. "I'm not letting you near those boasa statues."

Sligh looked at the ceiling and rolled his eyes. "What makes you think we want the boasa statues? If we wanted the boasa statues, would we have told NRI about them?"

"The statues are your payoff," Emala added. "They're what we're offering."

"That's rich," Han said. "Last I checked, they didn't belong to you."

"But we're the ones who made sure you knew about them," Sligh protested. "I'm surprised by your lack of gratitude."

"And you *do* need us," Emala added. "Ludlo Lebauer is a rough character. If you want to get those boasas from him, you need every advantage you can get. You need to know the situation."

Leia appeared to consider this, and Han began to have visions of great sabacc hands going unplayed. He was about to caution Leia against falling for their bait when she did.

"Information is good," she said, "as long as it's accurate. You'd have to convince me yours is."

Emala looked to Sligh.

Sligh nodded. "Tell her. But she has to hear us out." He caught Han's gaze and held it. "What else do you have to do? It's a long ride to the Pearl."

"We're listening." Han started to help himself to one of the pink refreshments -- then thought better of it. "For now."

Emala smiled. "And you'll be glad you did. How much do you know about how Lebauer came by the statues?"

"I was informed that Threkin Horm surrendered the boasas to satisfy a gambling debt," Leia said. They had discovered on Tatooine that Horm -- the president of the Alderaanian Council -- was illegally auctioning the very heritage he was charged with safeguarding. "The damage that man caused. If he weren't dead already, I'd strangle him myself."

"You might have to wait in line," Emala replied. "Horm owed everyone on Pavo Prime. To keep the boasas together, Ludlo Lebauer had to pay everyone else out of his own pocket."

"I hope you brought a freighter full of credits," Sligh said.

"What we brought or didn't bring is none of your business." Han had to resist the impulse to see if his credit-chip was still in his pocket; that was just the sort of cue the Squibs would be looking for, and he had seen on Tatooine how deft Emala's fingers were. "Forget about our credits, all right?"

Sligh raised his hands and turned his pink palms toward Han. "Easy, Slick. You know I wouldn't pry -- you're too smart for that."

"Sligh was only saying that Lebauer won't let those statues go cheap," Emala offered.

"Our offer will warrant his consideration, I assure you."

Leia managed to sound confident when Han knew she had to feel doubtful, for Emala had hit on the weak point of their plan. They had nothing to offer Lebauer except the promise of the galactic goodwill he would generate by returning the statues to the Alderaanian people. From what the Squibs were saying, that was going to be every bit the tough sell that Han had imagined -- but if anyone could pull it off, Leia could.

"How come you two know so much about Horm's problems, anyway?" she asked.

Instead of answering, Sligh said, "Look, all you have to do is buy a piece for us, *Second Mistake*. You get to keep the boasas."

"Let me get this straight," Han said. "We put up the money, do you a favor, and you let us keep our own boasas?"

"It's a good deal," Emala assured him. "You won't regret it."

"I regret it already." Han turned to Leia. "Enough listening?"

Leia nodded. "More than--"

"Emala!" Sligh said. "You forgot to tell them about the software!"

"Right -- the software," Emala said, not appearing forgetful at all. "You keep the boasas, and we give you the guidance software for the MS-19."

Leia's jaw fell. "The *Imperial* MS-19? Sienar's new MS-19 shield buster?"

"You mean Sienar's new *self-guiding* MS-19 shield buster," Sligh said. "We understand the first deployment was quite a surprise at Gondagali." Leia stared speechlessly at the Squibs, but Han knew an empty promise when he heard one.

"Forget it," he said. "You need a better lie than that to take us."

"There's no need to be rude," Emala said. "We're only trying to help the New Republic."

"I'm hurt," Sligh added. "After all we went through together, how can you doubt us?" Though he was speaking to Han, he kept his gaze fixed on Leia. "You have an NRI clearance. I'm sure you heard how valuable those S-thread codes we provided were?"

Leia stiffened, but said nothing.

"S-thread codes?" Han turned to find Leia's eyes as round as saucers. "What S-thread codes?"

"And how about the boron missile specs we sent?" Emala asked, also looking at Leia. "I'm sure those have proven useful. The Imperials are certainly puzzled by its sudden ineffectiveness."

Leia gasped, "How do you know... never mind."

Han began to see the rest of his vacation swirling down a refresher drain, but he did not complain. Leia's reaction meant this was important.

After a moment, Leia swallowed her shock and said, "Okay. Tell me about this piece we're going to buy for you."

"*What?*" Han's question was nearly a shout -- but that was okay, because no one could hear it over Chewbacca's roar of disbelief. "Have you gone deepsick? At least get them to put up the money!"

"If we could get our money, do you think we'd be bothering someone as important as you?" Sligh asked.

"Until we get *Second Mistake*, we're shut out of our own lockbox," Emala explained, "That's why we need you."

Han turned to Leia. "You can't trust them."

"Probably not," Leia said.

Chewbacca groaned, warning her not to forget what happened on Tatooine.

"Oh, I haven't forgotten." Leia's brown eyes began to smolder with a fierce light that Han thought of as her stubborn glow. "We still have to do it."

Han shrugged in resignation, then turned to Sligh. "So how much is this *Second Mistake* going to cost us?"

"Not that much," Emala said. "The value is mostly sentimental."

"It's not worth more than a hundred credits," Sligh added. "But Lebauer is attached to it. It'll probably take ten."

"Ten hundred?" Han asked. "Why don't you just say a thous--"

"Ten *thousand*, Solo." Emala shook her head sadly. "And we used to think you were big time." The comment stung more than it should have.

"I've got the credits -- don't you worry about that," Han said, fairly sure he had just seen the last of his sabacc money. "And I really wish I didn't."

Emala stretched forward and laid a small hand on his knee. "It's best for everyone," she said. "Trust me."

* * *

Encircled by opalescent walls and illuminated in ambient light, the VIP lobby of the Pearl Island Casino felt much like what it had been designed to resemble: the interior of a pearl. The lobby rotunda, which was just large enough to feel majestic without sacrificing intimacy, was even appointed in alabaster furniture with chalkwhite upholstery. Though Leia normally found casino architecture gaudy and overdone, she was impressed -- and hopeful. The combination of both taste and money boded well for her chances of persuading the owner to return the boasas to the survivors of Alderaan.

What the Pearl Island possessed in grandeur, it lacked in service. Like many fine establishments, at its front desk it eschewed the efficiency of droids in favor of the graciousness of sentients. The Solos had been waiting nearly ten minutes for someone to escort them to their suite, and Leia was starting to fear they would be late for their meeting with Lebauer.

"How sure are you about their story?" Han asked. He was sitting on the alabaster settee next to Leia, and there was no need to clarify who he was talking about. They had been discussing the Squibs off-and-on since parting ways outside the luxsub docks. "They might be playing us with some rumor they heard in a tapcaf."

"There are no rumors, not about this." Leia pulled Han down beside her so they could speak more quietly, and even then she was careful not to mention any specifics. "NRI is keeping a tight lid on this stuff. They wouldn't even tell the Provisional Council where their intelligence has been coming from."

"That's my point," Han said. "We've got no way to verify their story. We might be blowing my ten thousand credits on a scam."

Leia took his hand. "Han, NRI will reimburse you." She understood the reason for Han's hesitation, because she resented the intrusion into their getaway as much as he did. They both needed a break from New Republic missions. "When we tell them we have the guidance software for an MS-19, they'll probably rush the money out by courier."

Han gave her a cynical look. "Now you're starting to sound like a Squib."

"Ouch." Leia chuckled, then said, "The point is, we'll still have time for sabacc... and other things."

Han gave her a crooked grin. "Now you're talking."

C-3PO, who had been standing with the luggage next to the sturdy armchair where Chewbacca had settled in, came over. "Pardon me for interrupting, but it appears the porters have finally returned from their break."

C-3PO started toward a hallway beside the registration counter. Leia turned to see a burly Jenet in an ostentatious noron doublet-and-tunic ensemble leading a half-dozen confederates in similar attire into the

lobby. With domed muzzles, beady red eyes, and pointed ears rising close to their temples, they had a menacing and somewhat repulsive appearance that even a diplomat's eye had trouble looking past.

"It's about time!" C-3PO said. He pivoted on his waist rotator and gestured at the luggage. "It shouldn't take all seven of you. We have only three pieces."

The Jenet regarded him coldly. "That right?"

"Uh-oh." Han stood. "Something tells me those aren't porters."

"Would that be the hand-tailored clothes?" Leia replied, rising beside him. "Or the blaster bulges under their arms?"

C-3PO continued, oblivious to their exchange. "We're staying in the Admiral's Suite."

"Right," the Jenet said. "I'll have someone get your bags."

He turned and snapped a pair of clawed fingers at the Twi'lek clerk behind the registration counter.

"Not good," Han whispered.

"*Very* not good." Leia started across the floor. "Threepio, I don't believe these gentlemen are porters."

C-3PO turned to Leia. "They aren't?"

"No." Now that Leia was closer, she could see that the Jenets' pink skin was covered with a sparse white fuzz. "Please forgive my droid. He seems to have developed a processing fault."

The leader's gaze swung to Leia. "Forget about it." His red eyes were dead and unreadable. "Welcome to the Pearl." He thrust out a fuzzy hand. On the smallest finger was a pinky ring with a corusca gem as large as his thumbnail. "Ludlo Lebauer."

Leia was so shocked that it did immediately register that he expected her to take the hand he had thrust out. The Jenet's gruff manner and flashy clothes were so out of character with the Pearl's elegance that her mind was having trouble reconciling one to the other.

Fortunately, Han had come over with her. "Han Solo." He reached in front of Leia and took Lebauer's hand. "Thanks for having us."

If Lebauer noticed Leia's astonishment, his inert expression did not reveal it. He merely shook Han's hand and said, "Good to see you again."

Now it was Han who could not hide his surprise. "Again?"

"I was at the Seahorse when that pit boss insulted your Wookiee." He tipped his head at Chewbacca, who was coming to join them. "You might remember: in the third row of spectators, four places to the dealer's left."

Han did not even try to recall. "Uh, sorry."

"I'm afraid human memories are more fallible than yours, Administrator," Leia said. The Jenet were famous across the galaxy for their perfect memories. "But I'm sure he appreciated your support."

Lebauer snorted. "I doubt it. My clan was invested in the Seahorse."

"Well..." Leia forced herself to ignore her sinking feeling and looked around the room in awe. "You certainly seem to have recovered." Lebauer let out a rhythmic hiss that might have been a laugh. "Yeah, you could say that." He looked back to Han. "But don't even think about gambling here."

"Hadn't even crossed my mind," Han said innocently. "This trip is strictly business."

"Good, then we'll get along fine." Lebauer motioned at a four-armed Codru-Ji who had appeared next to the registration counter. "The porter can take your droid and bags to your room. I need to show you the shapes now."

"The 'shapes'?" Leia asked.

"You know," Lebauer said. "The statues."

Chewbacca, who insisted on running a security sweep before the Solos stayed anywhere outside their own apartment, left with C-3PO and the porter, then Lebauer -- still neglecting to introduce his associates -- led Leia and Han into the luxury wing of the casino. It was even more majestic than the rotunda, with four-story atriums, a minor forest of indoor plants, and a masterpiece from a different corner of the galaxy around every corner. Of course, there were also plenty of high-stakes gaming tables and mixer droids offering complimentary intoxicants to anyone still able to stand. But the tables were tucked in sound-shielded pits where they would attract attention without being intrusive, and the droids disappeared into the foliage whenever they were not needed to renew a refreshment.

Once, as one of the droids retreated between two trebala leaves, Leia thought she saw two pairs of dark eyes watching them from the shadows. She glanced over at Han, but he seemed not to notice.

Lebauer led the group past a formal sabacc pit where decorum seemed to require stately full-tabards for males and barely-there glittergowns for females, then ascended a slideramp to a U-shaped mezzanine with a security gate protecting the entrances to a dozen of the Pearl's grandest suites. Between each set of double doors hung an ornamental niche containing one of the boasa statues Leia had come to claim. With ten niches and ten statues, she found herself wondering whether the boasas had been acquired to decorate the wing, or the wing built to display the boasas.

Lebauer brushed past an astonished Jenet guard, then led Leia and her companions around the mezzanine to inspect the statues. Each piece was about a meter tall and constructed from some organic resin whose source science had yet to identify. Ranging in color from saffron yellow to a ruby so dark and rich it was nearly black, the boasas were little more than translucent shapes surrounding hollow patterns. There were graceful spirals rising inside a flared orange cylinder, tightly curved ribbons waving within a thin-waisted rectangle of amber, a single bubble sitting in the heart of a scarlet sphere. The pieces were as utterly hypnotic as Leia had recalled, and by the fourth one, she and Han both had to be prodded gently to move to the next one.

When they reached the final piece -- a twisted, copper-colored column with a single straight line rising along the central axis -- Lebauer turned to his mesmerized guests.

"They take everyone that way." He glanced at his associates, who obediently mumbled their confirmation, then drew his lap back in an expression that was more snarl than smile. "People book the Regal Suites just to see them."

"Then there must be few who can afford the privilege," Leia said, trying to lay the foundations for the request she had come to make. "Have you ever considered the public relations value of displaying them in a more accessible area?"

"Public relations 'value?'" Lebauer glanced at his associates, who took the cue to chuckle in unison. "Princess, what you think the Pearl is selling? We're exclusive. We don't want any public relations."

"Of course not," Leia said quickly. "But a sophisticated clientele also appreciates the value of philan--"

Leia let the sentence drop midword, for Lebauer had raised his hand to the statue and was running his fingers up along its swirling surface. She had to struggle to hide her outrage. Either Lebauer did not care about the destructiveness of what he was doing or he had not bothered to learn the basics of caring for the statues.

"Excuse me," Leia said. "But you really shouldn't touch the statue. The oil in your skin leaves growth-medium for a destructive bacteria suspended in the boasa."

"You don't say?" Never taking his eyes off Leia, Lebauer continued to touch the statue. "Security tells me people do it all the time." Leia knew the Jenet was deliberately provoking her -- though she could not understand why -- but the knowledge did not keep her anger from rising. Whether he intended to relinquish the statues or not, he gained nothing by damaging them.

"You know," Han said, "that bacteria might not be so great for you, either. I've heard it eats skin. There's even a theory it's what killed the Killiks."

Lebauer's red eyes flashed in alarm, and he almost removed his hand. Then he smiled and said, "You're bluffing."

"Did I bluff at the Seahorse?"

"Once," Lebauer said. "Horribly."

Han shrugged. "There you have it." He looked over to Lebauer's associates. "Who takes over when he's gone?"

"That won't be for a while, Solo." Lebauer pulled away from the statue, then turned to Leia. "Let's go somewhere and talk about this 'philanthropy' of yours, Princess."

"I'm glad to hear you're open to the idea," Leia said.

Actually, she was trying to guess what Lebauer might want from her; he was obviously hoping to turn her concern for the statues to some purpose of his own... which meant that now would be a good time to interrupt his timing.

Lebauer motioned his associates ahead, then took his own position in front of Leia and Han and started toward the exit. They were about halfway around the "U" when a soft rustle sounded in a bushy boran tree that rose from the floor below. Leia glanced over to see a head-sized leaf waving at her.

A small voice hissed, "*Missstake!*"

"What was that?" Lebauer asked. He stopped and turned to Leia, and the leaf stopped waving.

"I didn't catch that."

Leia snapped her eyes back to Lebauer. "Catch what?" She had to force herself not to look away. "I didn't say anything."

Lebauer frowned. "You didn't?"

Han looked over at Leia. "I didn't hear anything," he volunteered. "Nothing at all."

Lebauer's frown deepened. He studied Han for a moment. "Funny." He shook his head and started away. "I coulda sworn I heard something." Leia glanced back at the boran tree to find Emala's nose and eyes poking out between two leafstalks. *Go away*, Leia mouthed.

"You forgot!" Emala whispered.

Leia scowled and shook her head, then mouthed, *No*.

Han nudged her in the back. She turned to find Lebauer a few steps ahead, turned half-toward her and frowning.

"Excuse me, Administrator." Leia started after him. "I was just admiring that boran tree."

Lebauer's red eyes finally showed an emotion: bewilderment. "You don't have trees on Coruscant?"

"Not many," Leia said.

"Yeah?" Lebauer started forward again. "We'll have to send one back with you."

Leia exchanged relieved glances with Han, and together they followed Lebauer around the mezzanine. She had not forgotten *Second Mistake* -- quite the contrary. The point Lebauer had made of mistreating the boas had convinced her that he wanted something from her just as badly as she wanted the statues from him. Given that he was attached to *Second Mistake*, she had decided that the best time to ask for it would be as their other negotiations neared completion, when Lebauer would not want the matter to become a deal buster.

Unfortunately, the Squibs were not so patient. As Lebauer and the Solos were approaching the security gate at the end of the mezzanine, Leia heard more rustling beside her. She refused to look, but that was no help.

"You're selling us out!" Sligh's voice was a little louder than a whisper. "Some double-crossing jilly you are!"

Lebauer stopped at the gate and spun on his heel. "That time, I know I heard something."

"You might have," Leia said, trying to think of a way to cover -- and hoping that Sligh was well concealed. "I was, uh, saying goodbye to the boas."

"You were talking to a bunch of resin blocks?" Lebauer's gaze had turned steady and dangerous. "Really?"

A rustle sounded in the plant beside Leia -- she did not know what kind it was because she was trying very hard not to look.

It didn't do any good. Lebauer's eyes started to slide toward the mezzanine.

"Actually, Han and I were discussing whether we're interested in another piece you have." Silently cursing all Squibs -- and Sligh and Emala in particular -- Leia stepped into Lebauer's line of sight and asked, "May we see *Second Mistake*?"

Lebauer's muzzle fell open, and his associates -- listening from the other side of the security gate -- sputtered in astonishment.

"*Second Mistake*?" he asked. "How did you hear about *Second Mistake*?"

Leia and Han exchanged nervous glances, then Han said, "How we heard isn't important. We might be interested in buying it."

"That so?" Lebauer shrugged. "No harm in looking, I guess." He glanced at his associates and smirked. "It might even be educational."

He led the way to the casino's administrative wing, a bustling office warren full of Jenet clerks, Jenet overseers, and hard-eyed Jenet security guards, then ascended to a balcony executive suite that overlooked the office floor below. A bank of female clerks dressed in what Leia guessed was provocative office wear for Jenets -- backless blouses and kneelength trousers with hip slits -- greeted Lebauer by his first name as he ushered the group into his private office.

It was a grand stone-and-metal chamber so close to the surface that Leia could actually see the huge ball of Pavo Prime's blue sun undulating in the waves above the transparisteel roof dome. Lebauer took her by the arm and led her toward the back corner, where a black bas-relief panel hung on the wall in front of a large engulfer couch.

As they drew nearer, the sculpture resolved itself into the shape of a meter-high biped with the pointed snout and tufted ears of a Squib. Leia felt Han take her hand. Though the features of the face were too twisted to recognize, she had no doubt about who they were looking at: Sligh and Emala's companion, Grees.

His eyes were opened wide in horror, and one small arm was raised as though to ward off a blow. The other hand was extended toward the view, holding a circular datacard that looked as large as a dinner plate in his small grasp.

Han turned to Lebauer. "If this is a joke, we're not laughing."

"Sorry if it offends you, Solo." Lebauer's smug voice sounded anything but sorry. "You shouldn't have asked, if you're so close to the Squibs."

"We're not," Leia said. She shared Han's anger, for she had never forgotten the agony she had seen frozen on Han's face the night she freed him from his own carbonite coffin. "But what you have done here, I wouldn't have wished on the Emperor himself."

"That so?" Lebauer glanced at his associates. "The lady's real forgiving, considering what he had in mind for her brother."

Leia ignored him and continued, "I can't imagine you're foolish enough to think there's a legitimate market for this sort of thing, but I'm prepared to offer you a reasonable--"

At the word "reasonable," Lebauer's associates burst into laughter. The administrator himself chuckled bitterly. "There is no 'reasonable' amount." He turned toward a small bar in the adjacent corner. "I showed you *Second Mistake* because you asked. But it's not for sale -- not at any price."

"Everything has a price," Han retorted. "You're a casino boss. You know that--"

"Not this." Lebauer stepped behind the serving counter and shifted his attention to Leia. "Can I get you something?"

Leia shook her head. "No," she said. "We were just leaving."

"You were?" Lebauer seemed genuinely surprised. "Before we talk about those boasas?"

"If *Second Mistake* is truly unavailable, we have nothing to discuss." The thought of leaving the statues with Lebauer made Leia cringe, but this was a different game than the one she had come to play and she needed time to learn the rules. Besides, she really *had* meant what she said about Grees's fate. Just remembering how

Han had looked as he emerged from that endless moment of cold and darkness was nearly enough to break her heart all over again. "I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

Lebauer had to consciously close his gaping jaw. "Yeah, me too."

Leia nodded to Han and started for the exit. Lebauer's associates who were standing between them and the door -- exchanged worried glances and made no move to get out of the way as the Solos pushed through. When it grew apparent that Leia was not bluffing, a single pair accompanied her and Han across the office.

"You should know something before you leave," said the first associate, a tall one with a stooped back. "The Pearl would be happy to give the boasa statues to you. For Alderaan's survivors, I mean."

"Really?"

Leia continued toward the door without glancing at the speaker. "In exchange for what?"

"Nothing," said the second associate. He had a husky build and moon-shaped face. "It wouldn't cost you nothing."

"I doubt that," Leia said. "Nothing comes free on Pavo Prime." When they reached the door, she stopped and turned to see how her exit was being taken. Lebauer was glaring at her, but he quickly lowered his gaze when their eyes met. Interesting. Leia had assumed that he was in sole charge of the casino, but now she wondered.

The tall associate stepped toward her. "Look, all we want is a contract. To do something the New Republic needs done anyway."

"It's hard to imagine what that could be." Leia was being careful not to open a negotiation -- but she was not leaving either. "The New Republic is quite capable of taking care of its own needs."

Moonface stepped to Tall's side. "Somebody has to clean up after all those battles you're fighting," he said. "We only want the battle-salvage rights."

"The Pearl has a salvage fleet?" Leia asked.

Tall shrugged and spread his hands. "A subsidiary. What do you say -- your statues for the salvage rights."

"*Exclusive* rights," Lebauer said from the back of the office.

"So you can sell our own ships back to us at twice their worth?" Han scoffed. "Sounds pretty expensive to me."

"We'll pay you, Solo," Moonface said. "And when I say you, I'm not talking about the New Republic, if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do know what you mean." Leia turned and, with Han at her side, left Lebauer's office. "As I said earlier, we have nothing to discuss."

As they walked away, Tall came to the door behind her. "What's wrong?" he called. "Is this really about that Squib?"

* * *

"Where's *Second Mistake*?" Sligh stood beside Emala, glaring blaster bolts at Han and Leia from the doorway of their own suite. "You gave your word."

"We *thought* you could be trusted," Emala said. "After Tatooine, I suppose we should have known better."

"*You* should have known better?" Han stormed.

He pushed through the door, knocking Sligh to the floor and sending Emala stumbling back into the suite. Chewbacca was standing in front of the entertainment center, wearing a pair of headphones and carefully sweeping a bug-wand over the cabinet. C-3PO was near the corner closest, carefully steaming the wrinkles out of one of Leia's evening gowns. On the opposite wall, a cuttlefish the size of the *Falcon* was staring in through the observation dome.

Han glared down at Sligh. "Why didn't you tell us that *Second Mistake* was Grees frozen in carbonite?"

"Because we know how smart you are:" Sligh scowled and rubbed his chest where Han's knee had struck it. "You would have asked a bunch of questions, and we really need your help."

Chewbacca grunted in frustration and, glaring in the direction of the argument, hung the headphones around his neck.

"We *thought* you could handle the job," Emala said.

She returned to the entry area and -- with a furtive glance up and down the hall -- hastily shut the door.

"We *were* handling it -- until you interfered," Leia said from behind Han. "And we will get Grees back for you. But right now, Lebauer's price is just too high."

"Too high?" Sligh retorted. "What's the big deal about a salvage contract?"

Chewbacca growled a demand, which C-3PO translated from his corner.

"Chewbacca would like to know what salvage contract the pestilence-carrying rodent is talking about." C-3PO turned back toward Chewbacca. "But I really don't see much indication of disease. A few flitbiters, perhaps--"

"The salvage contract Lebauer wants from the New Republic," Leia interrupted. She narrowed her eyes at the Squibs. "The salvage contract that Han and I just found out about."

Emala shot Sligh an irritated look, then sighed heavily and said, "Look, the Shell has been trying to get that contract for months."

"The 'Shell'?" Leia asked.

"The Invisible Shell," Han explained. "Sort of a business syndicate, in polite terms." He turned to Emala. "You've been doing business with the Shell? I didn't think you were that dumb."

Emala shrugged. "We needed a supplier."

"It was supposed to be a one-time deal," Sligh added quickly. "But the money was just too good."

Both Squibs sighed and dropped their gazes, then Emala said softly, "Grees wouldn't stop."

"Stop what?" Leia asked.

Emala glanced at Sligh, who shrugged and gave a quick nod. "That deal on Tatooine really worked out for us," Emala said. "So we've been selling art to the Imperials."

"*Which* Imperials?" Leia demanded, going into interrogator mode. "Someone aboard the *Chimaera*?" Emala glanced at Sligh again, and this time he shook his head.

"Look, I may still be able to get Grees back," Leia said. "But not if you hold back on us. So far, what you haven't told me has come close to sinking this deal."

"We don't really know who our buyer is," Emala said. "We talk to Captain--"

"Hold on." Han looked over to Chewbacca. "You find anything?" Chewbacca groaned a disgusted response.

"I don't care about the stuff the maids miss," Han said. "I'm talking about bugs. The kind with ears."

Chewbacca shook his head.

"Good." Han led the way over to the dining area, where the Squibs had already left half-a-dozen empty drink glasses, then nodded to Emala. "You were saying?"

"We talk to Captain Pellaeon," Emala said. "But someone else is the buyer."

"And while you're waiting around to close the art deal, you pick up a few secrets to sell the New Republic, is that it?" Han was thinking of the intelligence they had been selling NRI. "A payoff here, a quick hand there--"

"You think we're thieves?" Sligh hopped onto a dinner chair and pulled the fruit bowl over to him. "That hurts."

"We get everything in an honest trade." Emala jumped up beside him, and together they began to paw through the bongas. "No one has reason to complain."

"The New Republic certainly doesn't," Leia said. "But I still don't understand how Ludlo Lebauer fits in. Did you skip out on a casino bill?"

Sligh stopped short of taking a bite from the bonga in his hand. "I don't know what we've done to make you insult us like that, but keep it up, and I'll forget where we left that guidance software."

"I thought someone of your experience would check out Lebauer with NRI before you left Coruscant," Emala added. "Obviously, you didn't."

"I checked," Leia said. "They didn't have much, only what's available from public sources: Lebauer's the administrator of the Pearl Island Casino and a well-respected member of the Pavo Prime Visitor's Board. The NRI report didn't say anything about the Invisible Shell."

Han began to have a sinking feeling. "There wasn't anything about Lorimar?"

"Lorimar?" Leia echoed.

"Ludlo's uncle," Han said. "You remember: Lorimar Lebauer. He was arrested by the Thyferrans for running a counterfeit bacta operation. Thousands of people died. He's locked up for the rest of his life."

"Blast!" Leia's eyes grew angry and narrow. "NRI gave me a sanitized file."

"Yeah." Han's thoughts were flying. "It makes you wonder what they were trying to hide, doesn't it?"

"Not really." Leia's voice had a cold edge. She turned back to Sligh and said, "You were hiding behind Ludlo Lebauer, weren't you? NRI was trying to protect him because they think he's the one selling them the Empire's secrets."

Sligh bit into the bonga and made a sour face, then mumbled, "No one gets anything past you."

"It's safer that way," Emala explained. "And using a cutout was a good deal all around. The Shell supplies us with artwork, we supply them with secrets. We sell the artwork to Pellaeon, and they sell the secrets to NRI. Everybody gets rich."

"Until Lebauer got greedy," Leia guessed. "Then he froze Grees in carbonite and demanded the name of your contact."

"Which you couldn't give him," Han surmised. "Either because he'd kill you... or because there's not one contact, there's a whole bunch."

"You're a sharp guy, Solo." Sligh rolled his eyes and turned to Leia. "That's when we decided you needed to know about the boasas."

"And you can fix everything," Emala said to her. "All you have to do is give Lebauer his salvage contract."

"But you have to do it in front of his board," Sligh added. "Things got personal between him and Grees there at the last."

"She can't let Lebauer have the contracts," Han said, not giving Leia the chance to even consider the idea. "I know how outfits like the Shell work. Once she starts with them, they'll keep coming back for more. It won't be long before Lebauer has her pressuring the Thyferrans to let his uncle Lorimar out of prison."

This drew snorts and smirks from both Squibs.

"Never going to happen," Sligh said. "Ludlo is the acting chairman now. The last thing he wants is Lorimar coming back."

"Really?" Leia cocked her brow. "*Lorimar* is the rightful chairman of the Invisible Shell?"

"He better be," Emala said. "That information cost us a thousand credits. The way we heard it, Ludlo is the one who told the Thyferrans where to find his uncle."

"Really?" Han took a bonga from the fruit bowl and began to polish it absentmindedly on his sleeve. "Now that we can work with."

* * *

By the time Leia and the others -- everyone except C-3PO -- tracked Lebauer to the Aquarium Room, seating for the first show had ended. But it hardly mattered. Lebauer and his associates were inside a private lounge, where they could watch the show without wondering who was watching *them*. The Solos and their companions were in the lobby, where a steady stream of Jenet females in backless blouses and clingsilk skirts flirted their way past the two guards almost at will.

"I still have my sabacc money," Han said. "It might be easier if I just broke the house."

"With ten thousand credits?" Emala said. "You'd need a bigger stake than that, Ace."

Han shrugged. "It might take a couple of days. So what? We're not in a... Hey!" He pulled his credit chip from his pocket and inspected the balance display, then frowned at Emala. "How do you know so much about my credit chip?"

Emala looked away.

Before Han could press her, Sligh asked, "What'd you have when you broke the Seahorse?"

"More," he admitted. "I put the *Falcon* up."

"You?" Leia gasped. "The *Falcon*?"

"Come on -- it wasn't like I was going to lose."

"Of course not." Leia returned her attention to Lebauer's private lounge. "But I think we'd better stick to our original plan. I don't want to end up begging a ride home on some tramp freighter."

Chewbacca groaned softly and, at a nod from Leia, started across the lobby. Leia took Han's arm, and together they followed the Wookiee to the lounge. When the two Jenet thugs stepped out to block Chewbacca's path, he slammed their heads together and caught them by the scruff of their tunics.

"So far, so good," Han said.

He pressed one of the Jenet's hands to the palm-reader on the wall. The door slid aside to reveal several tiers of cocktail tables descending toward the wall of a giant transparisteel aquarium, where a large troupe of aquatic aliens was undulating through the water in a remarkable -- and quite beautiful -- synchronized swimming number. Lebauer and his associates were clustered around a small knot of tables down in front, laughing and talking and hardly paying the show any attention at all.

Ignoring the astonished murmur that rose from the Jenets sitting at the higher rows of tables, Chewbacca led the way down to the front of the lounge and dumped the two guards on the floor. Then, as Lebauer and his equally astonished associates turned and started to rise, he roared a curse that dropped them back into their chairs. Leia stepped to the front of the lounge and, placing her back to the aquarium wall, faced Lebauer.

"Good evening, Administrator," she said. "Thank you for seeing me again."

Lebauer glanced down at his unconscious guards, then looked back to Leia, his red eyes as dead and unreadable as usual. "Reconsidered my offer, have you?"

"Actually, no." Leia was careful to keep her attention focused on Lebauer himself; she did not want to tip her hand by shifting her attention to the associates too early. "The salvage contracts aren't an option. The New Republic is not going to let your syndicate strip our wrecks and sell sensitive hardware to the Empire."

"Syndicate?" Lebauer raised his brows and tried to look innocent. "What's this syndicate you're talking about?"

"Save it for the tourists," Han said. "We know all about the Invisible Shell."

"And we're willing to deal," Leia said. "But no pretenses. I came to give something you'll want more than salvage contracts. After that, we never do business again."

"Sure, if thinking that makes it easier for you." Lebauer glanced at his associates and, finding their attention fixed on Leia, grew more uncertain. "Okay, why don't you tell me what I want more than salvage contracts?"

Leia smiled. "Your uncle."

Lebauer paled. "My uncle?"

"Lorimar Lebauer." Leia watched with satisfaction as several associates leaned forward in their seats. "As a special favor to me, the Thyferrans are willing to commute Lorimar's sentence."

"Isn't that better than salvage?" Emala asked. She astonished Leia by jumping onto Lebauer's table and blocking his face. "All we need from *you* is *Second Mistake*."

"And the boasa statues," Leia added, quietly fuming at the interference. How could she read Lebauer's reaction if she could not see his face? "Say the word, and your uncle is free."

Leia tried to step around where she could see Lebauer, but Emala picked that moment to step in a glass and spill Moonface's drink in his lap. He rose, cursing, and Leia's view of Lebauer remained blocked -- but the other Jenets at the table did seem to be watching Lebauer instead of her. She smiled and remained where she was. They were the ones he had to worry about -- not her.

But Emala was the first to run out of patience. When Lebauer did not respond within the first few moments, she reached into her cheek pouch and withdrew a credit-chip.

"Emala!" Han snapped. "Give that back!"

Emala ignored him and flipped the chip not to Lebauer, but to the Jenet at his side.

"There's a sweetener," she said. "For *Second Mistake*. But that's it. Take it or leave it."

The Jenet -- Tall -- studied the chip for a moment, then nodded. "It's authorized to ten thousand credits." He turned to Lebauer. "I don't know. That sounds like a good price for a Squibsickle."

"I'll bet it does," Han said.

He was glaring at Emala, but made no attempt to retrieve his pilfered sabacc money. They could give Lebauer no reason to back out now. Emala finally stepped back, and Leia saw that tiny beads of moisture had begun to glisten on his pink brow. His eyes remained unreadable, but he was sweating.

Lebauer took the credit-chip from Tall. "I tell you what I'm going to do," he said, tucking the chip into an inner doublet pocket. "I'm going to keep this and think it over."

Leia was hardly surprised; stalling was the favored tactic of the desperate. "I don't see what there is to think over. I should think--"

"What's the problem, Lebauer?" Sligh popped up on the tier above and pushed his head over the Jenet's shoulder. "You worried she might actually get it done?"

Lebauer's eyes flashed scarlet. "I'm not worried about nothing." He made a snatch for the Squib's neck and missed. "But you're gonna be."

Sligh's head appeared over the other shoulder. "I wouldn't want to give up being chairman either."

Lebauer shot to his feet and spun toward the Squib, one hand reaching under his doublet. Leia was half-tempted to let him draw his blaster; after Sligh's clumsy attempt to pressure Lebauer, they would be lucky if he did not see through the whole plan. Unfortunately, if she allowed Sligh to die, Emala would probably refuse to turn over the promised guidance software.

"Before you kill the Squib, there *is* something I should mention."

Leia would have to accelerate the plan and hope that Lebauer's anger blinded him to the rough transitions. "The Thyferrans are afraid this is some sort of fraud. They won't release Lorimar until I return to Coruscant and make a request in person."

Lebauer immediately forgot Sligh and turned back to Leia. "You don't say?"

"It's no problem," Tall said, shrugging. "Once he's free, you can have the goods."

"You think we're going to fall for that?" Han scoffed, coming to Leia's side. "Not a chance. We take the stuff with us."

Tall shook his head. "Not going to happen."

"I'm afraid I must insist." Leia kept her eyes fixed on Lebauer as she spoke; his eyes were narrowed in thought, and the corners of his mouth kept sneaking toward a smile. "The New Republic and I have a reputation for keeping our words. The Invisible Shell does not."

Lebauer finally met Leia's gaze, and she saw hope dawn in his expression. She was gambling on Lebauer's instincts as a survivor, and that gamble was paying off.

Tall said, "Look, there are ways to do this--"

"It's okay." Lebauer raised his hand to silence the other Jenet, then dropped back into his chair. "I'm sure we can trust the Princess."

"What?" Several associates gasped the word at once, and Moonface turned to scowl at Lebauer. "Ludlo, you fool! She's using mind tricks on you. Everybody knows she has Jedi blood."

Lebauer whirled on the other Jenet, his confidence returning now that he could see a way out. To stop Leia from releasing his uncle, all he had to do was see that she never returned to Coruscant. "You might want to choose your words more carefully," he said to Moonface. "I'm still the acting chairman of this syndicate."

Moonface met Lebauer's glare without flinching. "*Acting* chairman. You know this isn't right, Lebauer. If your uncle was here--"

"What I *know* is that it's my decision, and that my uncle isn't here. He's sitting in that miserable stinkhole on Thyferra." Lebauer slapped his palms on the table and glared at his associates, then said, "Now, does anyone here really want to tell me I shouldn't do everything I can to bring our chairman back to Pavo Prime?"

It was a nice touch -- and one that reminded Leia how dangerous Lebauer could be. The other Jenets had no choice; they could only look at the floor and mumble about how much they all wanted Lorimar home. Leia had to bite her lip to keep from snickering.

"That's what I thought." Lebauer stood, but motioned the other Jenets to remain at the table. "Stay. Enjoy. I'll be back when I've taken care of this."

Lebauer led the Solos and their companions out of the lounge, then went back inside to have security disarm the system protecting the boasas. Leia and Han exchanged knowing glances; they knew that was not the only message he would be sending.

A short time later, they were joined by a small security detail and taken to the Regal Suite mezzanine. To Leia's great surprise, all ten boasa statues had already been taken from their display niches and loaded into a covered luggage sled. She was even more surprised when she verified that they really were the statues and saw how carefully they had been packed.

Next, Lebauer took them to collect *Second Mistake*, and now Leia began to doubt her instincts. The last thing she had expected was for Lebauer to turn over the boasa statues quite so willingly. Perhaps he was not as ruthless as she thought -- or perhaps he was merely smart enough to know when he had already lost the game. In either case, they reached the administrative wing without incident, and there Lebauer dismissed the small security detail that had been escorting them.

"We don't want extra bodies," he explained. "Security back here is automated after hours."

Lebauer opened the security gate and led the way -- alone -- into the administrative wing. Leia caught Han and Chewbacca exchanging puzzled glances; the Jenet was taking them by surprise as well. They followed him into the shadowy offices and were about a hundred meters in when the hair rose on the back of Leia's neck. She stopped and, in the dim lighting, saw the balcony of Lebauer's executive suite hanging in the darkness above.

Han stopped at Leia's side. "What's wrong?"

"I feel something." She made sure her comlink was active and clipped it to the underside of her collar. "Maybe the Force."

The stop was all it took to send Lebauer springing into the nearest turbolift. Chewbacca roared and sprang after him, hammering a huge fist into the lift door as it slid closed in front of him. Sligh and Emala screeched in alarm and disappeared into the shadows.

In the next moment, there were no shadows as the office lights came up to full. Leia grabbed Han's wrist and, blinded by the sudden glow, turned to dodge down a half-glimpsed aisle.

They ran headlong into a blaster rifle being carried at port-arms and were roughly shoved back the way they had come.

"It'll go better if you don't run," Lebauer called. "Make my boys leave a mess, and I'll freeze whatever's left in carbonite."

"*This* doesn't sound good," Han said.

"But we expected it," Leia said. "That's a comfort."

Han paused. "You have funny idea of comfort, Leia."

Leia blinked the blindness from her eyes and saw that they were surrounded by Jenet thugs. Unlike the security guards, these were dressed in the uniforms of drink mixers, porters, and pit bosses. Their blaster rifles were all E-11s and rather new-looking. Three of these thugs were standing in front of Chewbacca just out of arm's reach, their weapons pointed at his chest and keeping him pinned against the lift tube's closed door.

A pair of Jenets returned with Sligh and Emala and shoved them into the middle of the floor with the Solos.

Leia lifted her gaze and found Lebauer resting his elbows on the balcony railing. "You don't have to do this," she said.

"Afraid so. I guess you should have gone with the salvage contracts." Lebauer braced his hands on the railing and looked down to one of the pit bosses, a rough-featured Jenet with sad eyes and a mangled lip. "Do it in the power plant, Verm. And this time, be sure the culkuda eats *all* of the bodies."

"That's it?" Han objected. "'Do it in the power plant?'"

Lebauer turned his blank face on Han. "Pretty much, yeah."

He stepped back from the rail, and Leia lost sight of him.

"Wait!" This was not going quite the way she had planned. "What will your associates think when we don't return to the Coruscant?"

Lebauer remained just out of view. "The same thing everyone thinks when Rebel heroes disappear: you ran into an Imperial patrol."

Emala's eyes grew even more round and large. "Oh, that's good." She turned to Sligh. "We didn't think of that."

"We didn't?" The fur stood up along Sligh's neck.

"Don't worry," Han said. "Leia has everything under control." He looked over and whispered, "Right, Sweetheart?"

"Right." More loudly, Leia called to Lebauer, "What about the boasas?"

"That's right -- the boasas!" Emala clucked her tongue at Lebauer. "I wouldn't want you to forget how much they're worth to you."

"We can get you five million easy," Sligh added. "You owe it to yourself to let us do this for you."

"Five million?" This drew Lebauer back to the balcony railing. "I don't know. If they show up again . . ."

He let the sentence drop, not saying what was obvious to everyone present. If the boasas showed up again, his associates would know he had deceived them to keep his uncle in prison ... and Leia felt certain that the penalty for such an offense would make being frozen in carbonite feel a long nap.

After a moment, Emala said, "So what if they show up again? They'll be in Imperial hands. Who's to know what happened to the Solos?"

"Can you believe these two?" Han complained to Leia.

"Unfortunately, yes," Leia said.

At the railing, Lebauer shook his head. "No, it's not worth the risk." He glanced at the one called Verm again. "Melt the boasas down."

"Right, boss."

"Leia, Sweetheart," Han whispered. "I think it's time."

"Right," she said. "It's time."

Lebauer turned away from the railing again, and Verm motioned for Chewbacca's captors to bring him over.

Leia dropped her chin toward her collar and said, "Now, Threepio and make it loud."

"Loud, Princess Leia?" C-3PO asked. Lebauer was already out of view again. "But I can't control the volume of your comlink from--"

"Threepio!" Leia hissed. "Just do it!"

Lebauer's voice began to come from Leia's comlink, repeating the orders he had given to Verm just a few moments earlier: "Do it in the powerplant, Verm, *and* this time..."

Verm stepped in immediately, the muzzle of his blaster-rifle pressed to Leia's ribs. "What's that?"

"What's it sound like?" Han demanded.

Verm's eyes grew wider as he continued to listen.

"Your voice is on it, too," Han said. "I suggest you get the muzzle out of my wife's ribs and call your boss."

"Don't move!" Verm pulled his rifle away and started for the lift tube. "Boss! Wait! Boss, you need to hear this."

Leia turned to Han. "Han?"

"Yeah?"

"I just love it when you talk tough for me."

Verm's helpers arrived with Chewbacca, who bared his fangs at the Squibs and made threatening noises. A few moments later, Lebauer was back at the railing.

"You were wearing a 'link?"

"Old diplomat's trick." Leia had C-3PO replay the exchange for him, then said, "If anything unfortunate should ever happen to us and I do mean ever -- I'm sure you know who my droid will play that recording for."

Lebauer closed his eyes, then tipped his chin back and stood that way for several seconds, clearly struggling to gather his thoughts. Han nudged Leia with his elbow. "We've got him now."

Leia nodded. "I think so."

Finally, Lebauer brought his chin forward and stared down at Leia. "Congratulations, Princess. You've done it to me good." He reached under his doublet and drew a big blaster pistol. "There's nothing to do but blast you myself, right here."

"What?" Han shrieked. He would have jumped in front of Leia, save that Chewbacca pushed him aside and took his place. "Maybe you didn't understand the part where the board hears that recording."

"I understand we're both dead now. The day the Thyferrans free my uncle, there's a marker on my life." Lebauer waved his pistol at Chewbacca. "Verm will you get that fur wall out of my way?"

Verm raised his blaster rifle, the Squibs hit the floor, and Chewbacca gathered himself to spring.

Leia stepped into the clear. "I can't believe you're the chairman of the Invisible Shell. Did you really think I'd ever get your uncle out of prison?"

Lebauer held his blaster half-raised. "You weren't going to?"

"Certainly not. He cost thousands of beings their lives. I'd never use my influence to free a mass murderer." Leia jerked a thumb at the luggage sled containing the boasas. "As long as I leave here with what I came for, you can sleep easy."

The color began to return to Lebauer's face. "You lied?"

"We bluffed," Han corrected.

Lebauer considered this for a moment, then said, "Well, if you bluffed . . ." He slipped his blaster pistol back into its holster. "You know my associates won't be happy when you renege on the deal."

"That recording is going to be around for a long time," Leia said. "I'm sure I can count on you to keep them in line."

"As long as you understand: if my uncle ever--"

"He won't." Leia waved a hand toward the lift tube. "I believe we have business to conclude?"

Lebauer nodded and turned to Verm. "Our guests won't need an escort after all. Take the boys and go back to work."

"You sure, boss?"

"They beat the house, Verm." Lebauer waved the thug away. "This time we pay."

Once the thugs were gone, Leia and the others ascended to the balcony and followed Lebauer into his private office, where Grees still hung on the wall in his carbonite shell. Lebauer took a last lingering look at the panel, then went over to his desk and entered a code on the control console. A trio of soft beeps sounded behind the carbonite, and he waved Sligh and Emala toward the panel. "*Second Mistake* is all yours."

The two Squibs removed the panel from the wall and wasted no time heading for the door with it suspended between them.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Han called.

They did not even slow down. "Now's not a good time," Sligh called over his shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll see you at the suite!"

Han and Chewbacca started after them, but had to stop when Lebauer pressed a button on his control console and the door closed in front of them.

"You're looking for a datacard maybe?" Lebauer looked amused. "The guidance software for the MS-19 maybe?"

"As a matter of fact." Leia began to have a sinking feeling. "I take it you know something about it?"

"You might say that." A deep chuckle began to roll from Lebauer's throat. "That's why I named my wall hanging *Second Mistake*."

Leia began to grow angry-most of all with herself. "There is no guidance software?"

"Of course not." Lebauer was grinning like a culkuda. "The Imperials got wise. The Squibs have been passing me false stories for a month. NRI doesn't want to have anything to do with me."

"Disinformation?" Leia was trembling with anger now. "And the Squibs knew it?"

"What do you think?" Lebauer took Han's credit-chip out of his pocket and flipped it into the air. "By now, the Squibs are scrambling into a luxsub and thawing their friend. I suggest you head for a docking salon yourself."

Han cast one last, longing look at the chip. Then, as Lebauer slipped it into a deposit slot on his desk, he nodded to Leia and Chewbacca and turned toward the door.

"At least you have the boasas." Lebauer began to chuckle. "And, just to show there are no hard feelings, I'll give you some free advice."

"Yeah?" Han said. "This should be good."

"Never trust a Squib," Lebauer said, laughing.

He was still laughing as the door dosed behind them.